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GREAT BEND: EPA digs in at chrome plant

By John Green - The Hutchinson News - jgreen@hutchnews.com

GREAT BEND - The EPA has become involved in cleanup efforts at a former chrome plating company that abandoned a building full of chemicals.

Groundwater is also contaminated, with a plume headed outward toward three public water supply wells.

The Environmental Protection Agency held a public meeting against a backdrop of crews carting off anything that potentially contained hazardous contaminants at The Plating Inc. plant, 8801 Sixth St. in Great Bend.

About a dozen residents, some who have been following efforts to control and clean the pollution for years, listened to the latest update.Clarence Barta, one of 17 residents in a housing subdivision a mile south and east of the plant site, was among them.

The EPA indicated the water pollution is headed northeast, away from his neighborhood, Barta said.

"That's good news if it's indeed the case. But we're all going to send in sample jars to have our water tested. We'll do it once a year, or maybe even oftener."

The first step is cleaning the plant site, said Katy Miley, the EPA's on-scene coordinator for the project.

"We expect to remove approximately 10,000 gallons of liquid waste, as well as any solid debris and machinery that may have residual contaminants," she said.

The contract cleanup crew, dressed in hazard suits and respirators, removed an air scrubber filtering system that the Kansas Department of Health and Environment required the plant to install in 1988, when soil contamination was first detected.

Crews dumped the debris into roll-off trash bins on the property, in the city's airport industrial site, to eventually be hauled to a hazardous waste burial site.

The cleanup, which will involve removing dozens of plastic barrels and metal drums containing corrosive and toxic plating solutions, was expected to take two to three weeks, Miley said.

The more difficult work will be cleaning a sunken storage tank near the center of the plant, which contains chromic acid. Officials suspect the acid is the source of the groundwater contamination.

Liquid in the tank will be pumped out, and a person will go down into the tank to clean remaining sludge, which is too thick to pump.

After all the material is removed, the whole plant will probably be pressure washed or dusted, Miley said.

Soil tests have come in clean, Miley said.

The plant cleanup cost is estimated at $200,000, which will come from EPA Superfund dollars.

The site is also nominated for the National Priorities List (NPL), which would make it eligible for the Superfund Trust Fund dollars that may be necessary for groundwater cleanup.

For a site to be included on the NPL, it has to score sufficiently high on a hazard ranking system, which evaluates the potential risk to human health and the environment.

It is likely to take at least six months to make the list, said Diane Easley, Missouri/Kansas branch chief

in the Superfund Division.

"I'm not sure there's ever been a proposed site that's not made the list," Easley said.

The KDHE first detected soil contamination at the plant in 1988 and ordered the operator to address state and federal hazardous waste storage and handling violations. Soil was excavated and a "chromium fume scrubber" installed.

In 1991, a sampling revealed groundwater was contaminated. The company installed a shallow remedial well in the mid-90s, followed by an additional well in 2002, and began paying for bottled water for two businesses nearly two miles away whose water wells were contaminated.

The plating company closed in 2005, and KDHE inspectors discovered the tanks of abandoned chemicals last year. It was then also determined the plume of water is migrating toward the city and its water supply wells.

It was that migration toward city wells that prompted the state to go the EPA, Easley said, to get the issue addressed "quicker than they can do it."

One of the first things the remedial project manager will probably do, Easley said, is install monitoring wells near the municipal water wells "to serve as a sentinel or early warning."

How quickly the contaminants are moving, she said, will dictate the response.

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